

## The Socratic Question

A lecture delivered at Claremont College

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### Introduction: Martin Diamond

Several of us contended for this honor, and in deference to that pacific spirit which characterizes Professor Strauss, if not every single syllable of his work, we tossed a coin, thinking by that means to avoid any conflict. In this instance, chance or *fortuna* seized *me*—I hesitate to say by the forelock. [Laughter] Everyone in this room knows of Professor Strauss, so there is no necessity whatsoever here to describe him to you. I therefore say this only. Since we know him, we know therefore how fortunate and how honored CMC and Claremont Graduate School and Claremont are that he has chosen to retire here and to teach here. Those of us who have studied with him know what a blessing it is to be able to sit before him again. Those of us who are his friends keep silent in public as to the extent of our debt to him. Professor Strauss. [Applause]

**Leo Strauss:** After having thanked Professor Diamond for his kind words, words of grace which modesty compels me to reject as greatly exaggerated, I declare that it is my intention to speak of the Socratic question. The Socratic question. The Socratic question: this expression is ambiguous. It may mean the question which Socrates *asked*, and the question *concerning* Socrates. I will speak today only of the latter. There is no Platonic or Aristotelian or Cartesian or Kantian question in the way in which there is a *Socratic* question. The reason of this is that Socrates is unique among the great philosophers who are gone. He is important to thinking human beings as the propounder of important teachings, but also on account of his whole life. His philosophizing seems to affect his whole life in every respect. He is *the* philosopher with a divine mission. Everything belonging to him—his eyes, his nose, his gait, his marriage, and last but not least, his death—has a symbolic significance. He lived in every respect what he said or thought. His deeds are as important as his thoughts. There is a unique harmony between his thoughts and his deeds.

Yet this most harmonious figure is at the same time strangely paradoxical. I will illustrate it by a contemporary example. In my opinion the most important or most interesting philosophic movement in our time is that movement called existentialism, which emerged about 1912<sup>1</sup> in Germany, owing to the coming together of the thought of Kierkegaard on the one hand, and of Nietzsche on the other. For both the Christian thinker Kierkegaard and the atheist Nietzsche, Socrates was of the utmost importance. And yet, when existentialism, the child generated by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche jointly, had reached maturity, Socrates has lost *completely* his conjuring power. For every movement has a flabby periphery and a hard core. In the case of existentialism, the hard core is the thought of Heidegger. Heidegger *very* rarely mentions the

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<sup>1</sup> Strauss says “1912” but might have misspoken.

name of Socrates. In the only mention which I know, he says Socrates is the *purest* of all philosophers. It may be clear that he meant by this *not* the *greatest* philosopher. What does he mean by this cryptic remark? He doesn't say. Does he mean Socrates's martyrdom, his resisting the Thirty Tyrants in contradistinction to Heidegger's not resisting Hitler? Or does he mean Socrates's dying for his convictions? Or that because Socrates was the only philosopher in the full light of history who did not write books? No one can know that, because Heidegger certainly never gives any comments on what he said.

Now in order to avoid this embarrassing difficulty, let us first consider how Socrates was seen *traditionally*, that is to say by thoughtful men who had *not* known Socrates himself. We see first that Aristotle says that Socrates was concerned with the ethical things, but in no way with the whole of nature, and in the ethical things he was seeking the *universal*. He was the first man to seek for definitions—for example, of justice—definitions leading up to knowledge and definitions expressing knowledge of the idea of the thing. Socrates, in other words, was concerned not *merely* with exhorting men to live virtuously, with leading them toward virtue, but also with knowledge of what virtue is, knowledge being understood in contradistinction to opinion, however plausible. And somehow he was led to the view that virtue itself is nothing but knowledge: virtue is *epistemic*, a paradoxical conclusion from the most commonsensical beginnings.

In a modified and simplified manner, Aristotle's view recurs in Cicero: Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from heaven, to establish it in the cities, to introduce it also into the households, and to compel philosophy to inquire about man's life and manners as well as about the good and bad things. Differently stated, Socrates was *the* citizen-philosopher, the man who philosophized not in the school or for the school, but in the marketplace; with a slight change of emphasis, *the* popular philosopher, the commonsense philosopher. Therefore Socrates was *particularly* popular in the eighteenth century, in the age of commonsense philosophy, where it was said that the proper study of mankind is man, and that seemed to be exactly what Socrates is doing. Philosophy has been said of old to be self-knowledge, and that means knowledge of man as man, but also knowledge of *myself*: of my defects and my virtues, if any. Now the decisive result of self-knowledge in Socrates was knowledge of one's ignorance, modesties in one's claims on behalf of one's opinions, leading toward something like skepticism. There is of course at this extreme the danger of the loss of philosophic passion, because if you know you cannot know, why should you make an effort?

Now perhaps the greatest example of Socrates in this sense<sup>2</sup> is Montaigne. I will say here at once that in Socrates's phrase that he knows that he does not know, the emphasis is as much on "he knows" than he does not know, and therefore the impulse to inquiry is implied in his statement. But if I may put the emphasis on what I regard in this respect as the most important point, Socrates represents as it were an experience repeated again and again throughout the [great] ages. There was always a towering edifice of science and scholarship, and its bearers were naturally filled with the pride of knowledge, if not with the pride of authors of the folios. Then a simple man, a layman, an *idiotes*, stands up, in a way awestruck by the Tower of Babel but also *not* awestruck, his awe being ironical, as we would say—a layman who sees through alleged

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<sup>2</sup> That is, Socrates's ignorance.

wealth, and the more or less well-concealed poverty of these personalities, and he appeals from the pride of knowledge to the humility of common sense.

Now the Socratic question would then be this: Can the wisdom in conduct, that wisdom which men may acquire through the experience of the human condition, as people say now, can that wisdom be separated from philosophic *inquiry*? And the Socratic answer, I believe, would be: *No*.

The Socratic question presented itself in a different guise after the meeting of Athens with Jerusalem. The believers in divine revelation were confronted with this alternative. Socrates is *the* philosopher among all others who was groping for the light coming from revelation. Socrates the pedagogue, the *paidagogos*, toward Moses or Christ, and yet on the other hand Socrates *the* model of the philosopher who was as such unable or unwilling to listen to revelation. The latter was expressed in the Middle Ages as follows. Socrates said to the people of Athens: I do not deny your divine wisdom, but I say that I do not understand it. I am wise only in human wisdom.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Socrates is definitely the pagan who cannot be converted to the sacred truth; and of the pagans we have heard that their virtues are splendid vices, and therefore there was always a temptation to find the vices of Socrates. That was not too difficult. There was in the eighteenth century, not far back, as you see, a Lutheran duo who wrote a booklet with the title “Socrates, neither a dutiful husband, nor a praiseworthy father of the family.”<sup>4</sup> [Laughter] And he [laughter] . . . this form of the Socratic question predominated from the time of the Church Fathers until the eighteenth century inclusive. When Erasmus said, “Sacred Socrates, or saintly Socrates, pray for us,” that is the one alternative, and repeated in a way in a well-known passage in Rousseau’s work.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps the most important utterance regarding the Socrates in this great age up to the eighteenth century is one by Sir Thomas More, which I will read to you: “to prove that this life is no laughing-time, but rather the time of weeping, we find that our Saviour himself wept twice or thrice, but never find we that he laughed so much as once. I will not swear that he never did [More liked . . . —LS] but at the least wise, he left us no example of it. But, on the other side, he left us example of weeping.”<sup>6</sup> End of the quotation. Thomas More knew of course that exactly the opposite is true of Socrates: Socrates left us *no* example of weeping, but on the other side he left us one or two examples of laughing.

Now the Socratic question took on a third, and as it seems its final, form in the nineteenth century owing to the radical questioning started by Nietzsche. That questioning had some kinship with the Socratic questioning, as no one knew better than Nietzsche himself. For instance, as Nietzsche somewhere says, it is a true judgment of scholars that men of all times believe [themselves] to know what is good and bad, praiseworthy and blameworthy, but it is a prejudice

<sup>3</sup> Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* IV.13 and V.14. See also Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 105n29.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Mentz and Friedrich Wilhelm Sommer, *Socrates nec Officiosus Maritus nec Laudandus Paterfamilias* (Leipzig: Tietze, 1716).

<sup>5</sup> “The Godly Feast,” in Erasmus, *Ten Colloquies*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 158. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (First Discourse), part 1: “the only precept he [Socrates] would leave is the one left to his disciples and to our descendants: the example and memory of his virtue. Thus it is noble to teach men!” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> More, *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (1553), chap. 13; see Strauss, *City and Man*, 61.

of the scholars that we know it now better than any time.<sup>7</sup> You know that this has changed; scholars don't say that anymore, but up to Nietzsche this is really true. Yet both at the beginning and toward the end of his career, Nietzsche's questioning is directed with great passion against Socrates. Nietzsche's philosophizing was meant by him to be at the same time anti-Christian and anti-Socratic, so that the old conflict between the pagan Socrates and Christianity or Judaism or whatever matter became insignificant. Nietzsche—what Nietzsche *intended* in his anti-Socratism appears most clearly from the extreme statements that he made in his first book, called *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche regarded Socrates as quote “the simple turning point and vortex of so-called world history,” unquote.<sup>8</sup> He ascribed, in other words, to Socrates the place which according to the Christian view was the place of Jesus. He considered Socrates within the context of the science of aesthetics. His concern was not merely theoretical, however, but a concern with the future of Germany or of Europe, a human future that must surpass the highest that man has ever achieved before, the peak of man hitherto, according to Nietzsche, in that manner of life that found its expression in Greek tragedy; more precisely, in the tragedy of Aeschylus. The *tragic* understanding of the world, that peak of all human understanding, was according to Nietzsche rejected and destroyed by Socrates, who therefore is the most questionable phenomenon of antiquity, a man of *more* than human size, a demigod.

The *non*-tragic understanding initiated by Socrates is identical with the theoretical or scientific understanding. Socrates, according to Nietzsche, is the first theoretical man, and that explains why he has this *singular* attraction and yet also is so singularly paradoxical. Socrates is the incarnation of the spirit of science, radically unartistic and a-music. Quote: “In the person of Socrates the belief in the comprehensibility of nature and in the universal healing power of knowledge has first come to light.”<sup>9</sup> Unquote. That is Nietzsche's explanation of Socrates's saying that virtue is knowledge. Socrates is the prototype of the rationalist, and therefore of the optimist; for optimism is not merely the belief that the world is the best possible world, but also the belief that the world can become the best of all *imaginable* worlds, or that the evils that belong to the best possible world can be rendered harmless by knowledge. Thinking can not only fully understand being, it can even *correct* being. Life can become guided by science. The living gods of myth can be replaced by a *deus ex machina*, by technology. Rationalism is optimism, since rationalism is the belief that reason's power is unlimited and essentially beneficent. Science can solve all riddles and loosen all chains. This is what Socrates stands for according to Nietzsche. The full and ultimate consequences of the change effected or represented by Socrates appear only in the contemporary West in the 1870s, let us say, when Nietzsche wrote this piece, in the belief in universal enlightenment and therewith in the earthly happiness of all men within a universal state and in such philosophic movements as utilitarianism, liberalism, democracy, pacifism, and socialism. These consequences by themselves are for Nietzsche sufficient proof that the time of Socratic man has gone, as he put it. Accordingly, Nietzsche has to hope for a human future beyond the peak of pre-Socratic tragedy, early Athenian tragedies.

I mention only one peculiarity of this attack on Socrates. Nietzsche treats the Socrates presented by Aristophanes in the *Clouds* and the Socrates as presented in the Platonic dialogues as

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<sup>7</sup> See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 202, and “On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life.”

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, sec. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, sec. 15.

identical. That seems extraordinarily preposterous, but it has a simple foundation: both Socrates[es], the Socrates of the *Clouds* and the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues, are passionately concerned with knowledge or science, with *episteme*, and therefore the difference is of secondary importance to Nietzsche, who was concerned with art in contradistinction to knowledge.

Now it is very easy to dismiss Nietzsche as an extremist. He himself knew that he was given to extremes: he spoke of the magic of the extreme. But this dismissal, which is so easy, presupposes that there is a safe and sane *moderate* position, a mainstream manifestly superior to the extremes. Such a mainstream could be, for example, our scientific culture. But there is this difficulty. Our scientific culture has been deeply affected by Nietzsche in the following way. There were two German academics who were the first men who learned from Nietzsche something, and they were Georg Simmel and Max Weber, and they led to that profound change within social science according to which social science must be value-free. This doesn't come from John Stuart Mill or from David Hume, as some people like to believe: it comes *indirectly* from Nietzsche. And I say this without any misguided sympathy for the German contribution in particular. Nietzsche himself questioned the possibility of *any* purely theoretical knowledge, of objective knowledge. According to him, all knowledge rests on foundations which are *historical*, on historical decisions, on *value* decisions. Even physics. And these foundations cannot be validated or *invalidated* rationally. Even modern physics is not more than one possible interpretation of the world among many, and therefore not in the last analysis objective. Now what Nietzsche's academic followers of the first generation, Simmel and Weber, did was this: that they tried to save the objectivity of science by declaring all *value* judgments and only all value judgments to be beyond the competence of wisdom. In other words, it was a kind of blunting the edge of Nietzsche's attack.

Now at any rate, it is at this point that people circumstanced like myself, social scientists, become *compelled* to be concerned with Socrates. However much we would like to make *only* studies, say, of this election year and the political sociology, we cannot disregard some other things, for the following reason. Until the time when Nietzsche began to affect social science, social science was a *valuating* science, and social science was this from its beginning until the 1890s. Now of course social science up to that time could have been merely naïve, something like astrology and alchemy. Or was it aware of something of which we are no longer aware? The value-free social science is exposed to certain difficulties into which I cannot go. We can speak, I believe, of a crisis of social science connected with that value-free character. This fact forces us to consider the earlier social science and in particular its foundation, and that means Socrates. We thus become confronted with the Socratic question in the narrow sense: What is it that Socrates stood for, in contradistinction to the question of the worth of what Socrates stood for?

Now this question of what Socrates stood for is a historical question, but a historical question of more than historical importance since it is inseparably connected with the question concerning the foundations of political or social science, and even of philosophy or science as such. The earnest and passionate study of the history of philosophy as history began in the nineteenth century. In a way we must continue the work started then, but there is a fundamental difference between the approach *we* must make and the approach started in the nineteenth century and surviving with great numerical power in our age. And the reason is this: the history of ideas, as it

is sometimes called, as it developed in the nineteenth century was based on belief in the foundations of the Western world. However skeptical[ly] people might speak, that was part even of the proprieties of language, to speak humbly about the foundations of the Western world, but these foundations were nevertheless taken for granted. We are confronted fundamentally with the fact that these foundations have been shaken, and therefore our study of the great tradition can no longer be traditional either in the traditional sense or in the modern nineteenth-century sense. As regards the way of study which came into being in the nineteenth century, one may describe it as *genetic* in two senses. First, people were very eager to study the *genesis* of the thought of the thinker. Probably the best-known case is that of Plato: trying to find out what the young Plato thought, the middle Plato, and the old Plato; and perhaps one could find out when a certain conceit emerged for the first time in Plato's mind, and so on. But the *deeper* meaning of genesis is the genesis of the thought of the thinkers out of the spirit of their times and their nations, i.e., when you study Plato, you must know in the first place [that] he was a Greek, and therefore blessed or cursed with the peculiar opinions or prejudices of the Greeks. If you do not start from that, you will not understand him. One can give as another example Machiavelli, who was of course a man of the Italian Renaissance, if not of the Florentine renaissance in particular. Now I say we are no longer permitted to proceed in this manner because life is now much too serious for that. From every point of view the Socratic question, in contradistinction to the question regarding the other great thinkers, has this peculiarity, namely, that Socrates did not write books. In the case of Plato, you can quote, as it were, from the horse's mouth, at least it seems. In the case of Socrates, you cannot do it because it is always mediated by other people.

Now there are four primary sources, and I will devote the rest of this lecture to this more technical but not unimportant and not uninteresting case. There are four primary sources. The first is the comedy of Aristophanes, the *Clouds*, which I mentioned before. The second are the Platonic dialogues. The third is Xenophon's Socratic writings, and the fourth is Aristotle, the few but very weighty remarks which Aristotle makes. One could say one should give the preference first to Aristophanes, for the simple reason because he is earlier, older than the three others. I regard this as a sensible suggestion, but it requires of course that we know or learn first what the comedy, in particular Aristophanean comedy is, otherwise we will misunderstand the great jokes which Aristophanes makes. But in doing so we come to see a Socrates through Aristophanes who is very different from the Socrates whom we know through Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle: a head of a school, who is in the first place a student of nature, a teacher of rhetoric—a sophist, one could say, or more cautiously and politely, a pre-Socratic Socrates. Such a Socrates existed. Everyone who deals with these matters knows a passage in Plato's *Phaedo*, at 96 following, where Socrates on the day of his death tells his friends that when he was very young he engaged in this kind of natural science, natural philosophy, what the Greeks called *physiologia*, but then he turned away from that. But he did it originally. And there is also the story in the *Apology of Socrates* by Plato of the Delphic oracle, that the Delphic oracle induced him to engage in the kind of inquiry for which he became so famous, what he did at the marketplace at the tables of the moneychangers. But there is one indication which is usually not sufficiently considered: when the Delphic oracle said that Socrates was the wisest, or something of this kind, he was already known *at that time* as a wise man. He was already *known* as a philosopher *before* he started out on the mission so beautifully described in the *Apology*. So there *was* a pre-Socratic Socrates. But we are interested naturally in the *mature* Socrates, the Socratic Socrates, if I may say so. Now of him we know nothing through Aristophanes. We would have to turn to Plato,

Xenophon, and Aristotle, and here the *prima facie* evidence is in favor of Xenophon, because Xenophon knew Socrates himself whereas Aristotle did not—only through reports. And as for [Plato],<sup>10</sup> everyone admits that Plato's dialogues are works of art of the first order. Plato was not a historian. But Xenophon showed by deed, by writing his Greek history, that he *could* be an historian. So I think we should pay due attention to Xenophon.

Now that is today, that is a part of the reigning superstition, if I may use an old-fashioned expression, that Xenophon must not be taken seriously because he was narrow-minded and simple-minded, a kind of retired colonel who was mightily interested in horses and dogs, and in farming and in such things, and in virtue in a very general way—you know, riding straight into fences or so [laughter], but he couldn't possibly have understood Socrates. The most beautiful proof that this is a prejudice, with all the unpleasantness of prejudice, is given by a remark of that very venerable scholar, John Burnet, who tried to explain the fact that—and I quote from memory: How come that people like Xenophon and Meno were attracted by Socrates? Answer: Because of Socrates's military reputation.<sup>11</sup> [Laughter] So in other words, Socrates was such a wonderful soldier that even such a retired colonel, with his proper moustache, a Colonel Blimp kind of man, would—nevertheless. Now that is of course sheer nonsense, because Xenophon doesn't say a *word* about Socrates as a soldier. What we know about Socrates as a soldier from the primary sources is only what Plato tells us, and especially through the mouth of the drunken Alcibiades. [Laughter] Now this only in passing. It is a prejudice, and the first thing one has to do if one is confronted with a prejudice is to fight the prejudice with another prejudice, and I will limit myself to one such rhetorical argument. That non-simple-minded thinker called Machiavelli refers to Xenophon *more* than to Plato and Socrates and Cicero combined. Now if *Machiavelli* was impressed by Xenophon's sharpness, we have an inducement to look for that sharpness on our part.

Now the chief work of Xenophon that is devoted to Socrates has the title *Memorabilia*—the usual Latin translation. Memories. Memories: not memories of Socrates. The title "Memories" would fit much better Xenophon's work entitled *Anabasis*, the ascent of Cyrus, where he tells his life story, his own deeds and speeches. But this other work has also a funny title, because the ascent of Cyrus is presented in book 1 or so and the bulk is devoted to the *descent* of the Greeks from the interior of Asia Minor under the leadership of Xenophon. So that is quite funny. Now what Xenophon indicates by calling this book memoirs *tout court*, not memoirs of Socrates, is very clear: These are my memoirs *par excellence*. What I heard from Socrates, about Socrates, is the most important event in my life, much more important than this beautiful withdrawal from Asia Minor to the coast. Now the theme of the *Memorabilia* is this. (In one word, because of the time.) Is Socrates's justice—Socrates presented as just: (a) he did not commit the crime of which he had been accused, (b) he was just in the deeper sense because he was benefiting everyone he came in contact with. And so that is what the bulk of the *Memorabilia* is devoted [to]. Now justice is of course a virtue of the utmost importance, but it is not the *only* virtue, and therefore to present Socrates as just is nevertheless a *limited* presentation, consideration of Socrates. In the *Memorabilia*, we may say, [Xenophon]<sup>12</sup> abstracts from that in Socrates which transcends

<sup>10</sup> Strauss says "Aristotle" but evidently means Plato.

<sup>11</sup> John Burnet, *Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Plato* (Macmillan, 1914), 137 n. 2; Burnet, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), xiv ff.

<sup>12</sup> Strauss says "Socrates," but clearly means Xenophon.

Socrates's justice. Naturally, only a fool would say that the other Xenophontic works deal with Socrates's *injustice*, because if you take the simple example of a shoemaker, he may be a just and honest man, but that is not his part of shoemaking. So there could be activities of Socrates which do not fall under the heading "justice," and do not in any way qualify as fundamental [in]justice.

Now [Xenophon]<sup>13</sup> abstracts in the *Memorabilia* from everything which transcends justice. An example: He asserts that Socrates studied *only* the human things, meaning the moral and political things, and yet the same Socrates in the *Memorabilia* develops the doctrine of the *whole*, a theology, a teleological theology. And he also, as Xenophon asserts, never ceased considering what *each* of the beings is, not merely the moral and political things. And there are other examples into which I do not want to go. One passage is particularly interesting, perhaps, and that is a remark in the *Memorabilia* to the effect that Socrates treated different people differently. Those who contradicted him in a given point, to them he addressed the question: What *is* that thing to which you refer here? For example, a man says: This was a great general. And Socrates says, "What *is* a great general?" before we see whether X was a great general. This "What is?" question he applied when he was contradicted.<sup>14</sup> But when he was not contradicted, when he was completely in control of the . . . position, and then he proceeded, Xenophon says, through the opinions of men, through the opinions which men generally accept, and so he brought about a unanimity which no one else brought about in the same manner. This latter kind of *dialectic* reminds Xenophon of Odysseus as described by Homer and who was called a safe speaker.<sup>15</sup> So there is a *twofold* dialectics: the dialectics leading to *agreement*, and this is achieved by not transcending opinion; and on the other hand there is a dialectics *leading* to the truth. This Socrates applies only to what Xenophon here provisionally calls the contradictor. He calls it more specifically in another place of the *Memorabilia* "the good natures."<sup>16</sup> Now good nature does not mean what we now understand by a good-natured fellow, but a good nature means a man who has the necessary mental equipment for tough studies. And the strange thing in the *Memorabilia*, and perhaps in other writings of Xenophon, is that there is never a conversation with a good nature, with a man possessing a good nature. The *peak* is missing. Xenophon *points* to these peaks in various ways, but he never lets us see them. He makes us expect, for example, a conversation between Socrates and Plato, and that of course would be quite a thing. Xenophon whets our appetite but does not satisfy it, and you can say the very simple reason is that this goes beyond human power, to write a dialogue of two or three pages between Socrates and Plato. There may be fools who have tried it, I do not know, but it would be at any rate a foolhardy enterprise.

I do not want to—one can perhaps state the principle for understanding the *Memorabilia* as follows. One must see and read not only what is there—of course, that's the first point—but one must also see what is *not* there and yet pointed to obviously by the author. Xenophon himself has stated the principle guiding his literary activity in a speech occurring in his *Anabasis*, at the end of book 5: "But it is noble as well as just and pious and more pleasant to remember the good

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<sup>13</sup> Again Strauss says "Socrates" but clearly means Xenophon.

<sup>14</sup> *Memorabilia* 4.6.13-15.

<sup>15</sup> *Memorabilia* 4.6.15.

<sup>16</sup> *Memorabilia* 4.1.2



things rather than the bad ones.”<sup>17</sup> Observe the single comparative, “more pleasant,” because it can be pleasant to remember bad things after you are through with them, but generally speaking it is noble and just and pious to remember the good things. In brief, to be a good boy, without resentments, without morally withdrawing. And this characteristic of Xenophon, on which he acts all the time, makes him so unpleasant to the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century reader because we want to have a kind of tougher dishes than Xenophon gives. A simple example from the *Anabasis*: he says that they came to a certain city, and that was inhabited, and prosperous, and big. Fine. All good qualities. And then later on he says that they came to a big city, prosperous, inhabited, and big. And then he says they come to a big city, meaning that it was *not* inhabited and was *not* prosperous because people had run out. But this negative thing, uninhabited, poor, he doesn’t say.<sup>18</sup> I will illustrate it by the mouth of an author of the eighteenth century, in a way the heyday of love of Xenophon, and that is Jane Austen. In the beginning of the last chapter of *Mansfield Park*, she says: “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.”<sup>19</sup> Now Xenophon is here, and Jane Austen is here. No doubt about that. [Laughter] And we can learn something of the . . .

Now if I had infinite time, which I don’t have, no one has, I would go on and speak about, briefly the three other Socratic writings of Xenophon: the *Oeconomicus*, the *Symposium*, and the *Apology of Socrates*, but I postpone it to another occasion because I have already trespassed on the time, if not on your good natures. Thank you.

[Applause]

## Discussion

**Moderator:** If any of you have to leave, feel free to walk out now. But those who want to stay are welcome.

**Leo Strauss:** Am I permitted to say anything before the questions? And that’s why I think that . . . this lecture, which is necessary—begin at the beginning. Do you remember that I spoke at the beginning of [Heidgger’s remark] that Socrates was the purest of all philosophers and whether this might not be connected with the fact that he did not write books?<sup>20</sup> I would like to add a remark to this point. The Socratic question is in a way contained in the fact that Socrates did not write. But what does his nonwriting mean? Writing is essentially defective, Plato’s Socrates says. But Plato showed by deed that one can write books which are *free* from the essential defects of writing. Now in another Platonic dialogue, the *Symposium*, Diotima speaks of three kinds of *eros*. All *eros* is grounded in desire for immortality or eternity, as she says, and the highest form, we might say, of this *eros* is philosophy. This Socrates and Plato have in common,

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<sup>17</sup> *Anabasis* 5.8.26.

<sup>18</sup> *Anabasis* 1.2.6, 7, 10-11, 13-14, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Mansfield Park* (1814), chapter 48.

<sup>20</sup> At the start of the discussion, the sound of moving chairs and general disruption drowns out Strauss’s words. Throughout, a person sitting near the microphone coughs and shuffles, drowning out the discussion, as does a loud mechanical knocking sound towards the end of the session.

this highest form. The *lowest* form according to the argument is the generation of children. People, men generate children for the sake of immortality, not only for the species but of themselves, the desire that their *stamp* is impressed somehow on their children. Now clearly the generation of children does not guarantee immortality even in the loosest sense . . . if a man generates ten children, twelve children, he doesn't know whether his children will generate children, or if they generate them . . . so this is not the most . . .

The next . . . is immortality through the *spiritual* generation of children, and that means in particular through *writing*; say, Homer. It's written. The specific motive of this kind of the quest for immortality is love of honor, love of honor not for decorations but eternal glory, as people used to say in former times. What Diotima suggests is that there is no man, however high, however dedicated to the highest form of the striving for immortality which is philosophy, where no longer one's *own* immortality is involved but the contact with things immortal. No man, however high, can live without participating in one or the other of the lower kinds of *eros*, the generating of children or writing books. Now let us look at the two men . . . Plato wrote books but he did not generate children. Socrates generated children but he did not write books. And that is perhaps the peculiar purity of Socrates, that he did not write books. Now if we look, as we cannot help looking, at Jesus, we see that Jesus did not partake of either of the two lower forms of *eros*, generation of children and writing. And this is perhaps a question for us, whether we have not to . . . poetry . . . on the ground of the fact—this question, I'm sorry.

**Comment:** Aristotle both generated children and wrote books. [Laughter]

**LS:** But you have such a difference in the case of Plato and Socrates.

**Moderator:** Are there any other questions?

**Comment:** Often the reason given for choosing Plato over Xenophon as an interpreter of Socrates is that the arguments that Xenophon puts into the mouth of Socrates read like sketches of arguments that are given in Platonic dialogues. There are details omitted, but you can recognize the similarities. What do you have say about that line of reasoning?

**LS:** Well, what is wrong with sketching? I mean, a developed argument is easier to follow than a sketched argument, that's true; but on the other hand, sketches are also quite good because they can guide you to elaborate the argument by yourself. If the argument means however that Xenophon's arguments are sometimes of atrocious illogicality, I would say the same is true of the arguments of the Platonic Socrates . . . Xenophon has a narrower . . . meaning he also has this *unbelievable* power of Plato. But he knew it and acted upon it; he made the best of it, and what else can you expect of him?

**Comment:** I think the presumption of this line of argument is that Xenophon copied the arguments from the Platonic—

**LS:** Ya, but this is . . . it is much more reasonable to assume that Xenophon and Plato belong to the surround, the environment of Socrates, to those who were together with Socrates. And that they in various ways presented that Socratic action by . . . he was raising questions, and probably

*all* the stories, either in Plato or in Xenophon, are invented. But no one can *know* that. There *might* have been such a scene as that with Protagoras in the *Protagoras* or that with Meno in the *Meno*. Who knows? But since we can't know it, it is a waste of time to think about it and to say—well, let us understand what we learn from the story, which, if not true, is presumably well-invented. The main objection to Xenophon is that he is plain dumb, a term which would never be used by scholars, but that is what they mean . . . [Laughter] . . . But that is simply . . . returning.

**Comment:** I'm afraid, Professor Strauss, that I am . . . a professional historian and terribly conscious of the difference that time makes in the dialogue between a present and its past. And you speak as though there was one Xenophon. And I am terribly conscious of the fact that I have been reading a nineteenth-century edition of Xenophon in the classic series, but set against that is a translation of Xenophon by Sarah Fielding, which is an eighteenth-century translation, which is a very different Xenophon.

**LS:** In other words, you raise the great question, whether we can ever transcend our historical situation. That is a very serious—

**Same commenter:** . . . my profession. [Laughter]

**LS:** No, I understand that, and this is—I think most contemporaries, and even most contemporaries whom I respect very highly, believe it is impossible. *I* don't know. And I believe that I *act* on the view when I try to understand, say, the *Memorabilia*, or for that matter the *Protagoras* or the *Gorgias*, that—I don't see the intrinsic impossibility. The inductive argument to which you refer, that Sarah Fielding and that is . . . Mr. Dakyns, whom I like very much, who looked at Xenophon as if he were a boy from Harrow or so, very charming but obviously not true [laughter] . . . Pardon?

**Same commenter:** Only partly true, not untrue.

**LS:** Yes, only partly true. And the induction is based, I think . . . because neither Sarah Fielding, nor Dakyns, nor Reichenbach or whoever there was, were in a profound *need*, under a necessity to—it was not a matter of life and death for them to understand Xenophon on his own terms. And I believe owing to this terrible fact that we live in an age in which all convictions and certainties have lost their power—not for all individuals, but for the time—makes our concern with the past much more serious, much more passionate. And if we speak of induction, I mention another thing. If you think of the way in which in the nineteenth century the greatest classical scholars believed they could know the dates of each Platonic dialogue, or of each section in Thucydides, for that matter, and what Thucydides wrote, say, prior to the Peace of Nicias, and after the Peace of Nicias, this kind of thing, and today I think the best scholars have become *very* doubtful whether there can be . . . Surely Xenophon probably changed his mind on many questions. He lived very long and had plenty of opportunity for that. But that is a fair assumption, that what he wrote, say, around 370 would have been very different from what he wrote at around 350. The question is whether we can *know* that, and more particularly the question is: If we are confronted with a difficulty, say, with a contradiction, is this contradiction necessarily best explained by the fact that Xenophon changed his mind? Could it not be due to the fact that his *intention* differed in one work or the other? *Agesilaus* and the *Hellenica*: one is a

praise of Agesilaus and the other is a history. This alone explains why he changes words, because rhetoric, especially epideictic rhetoric, requires a splendor which would be unbecoming in a history. That must be decided in each case on its own merit, I believe, and it would be wrong just to accept this tremendous evidence of scholarship as in a fundamental respect sound. It *may* be, but I think it needs now some proof which was not required, say, prior to World War I or even prior to World War II.

**Same commenter:** I don't think you're falling into my own genetic fallacy by saying that our need makes it possible for us to get a truer Xenophon than an age that was less hungry.

**LS:** Ya. But there *could* be something else. There could be that our situation as it is now, as it has come to be now, is in itself much closer to classical thought than to, say, the nineteenth century, that is the *certainty* of progress, and ever-increasing progress, or going with it what is called philosophy of history, and which made it so *sure* for the men in the nineteenth century that with the philosophic questions, at any rate, we are the top and they are only humble preparers. Aristotle already knew. Ya? Already. Unbelievably—

**Same commenter:** This makes us allies of the eighteenth century, before progress.

**LS:** The eighteenth century was also already . . . But the point is whether this *uncertainty*, this chaos, intellectual chaos in which we live does not bring us closer to the *earlier unprotected* times. Think only of international law, the decencies acquired since the seventeenth century or so, and then when we read what happens to prisoners of war, say, in a Euripidean tragedy—well, we have it again. I mean, neither sex nor age is in any way a protection [from] all the possible sufferings and miseries. Extremes are possible again. In this sense, we are today unfortunately more sober, more quote “realistic” than the nice gentlemen of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. That is the reason why I believe we have a *chance* of understanding which did not exist in these more protected times, where people knew or believed to know things which are unfounded.

**Same commenter:** Thank you.

**LS:** Mr. Pangle?

**Mr. Pangle:** You said that while for Nietzsche the question and problem of Socrates was very important, for Heidegger this has ceased to have its importance. I wonder if you could say something about why that is.

**LS:** Oh, that is a very long question. I don't—I can only—let me repeat only the fact. I think if you go through the works of Heidegger—I have read everything, *almost* everything—you would find references to Socrates very rarely. The only one that I remember is the one to which I referred. But to Plato—no, I'm sorry, to Nietzsche and to Kierkegaard there are also quite a few, especially in his earlier writing. Why this is so, that is a long question which I am not able to answer without giving first a presentation of what I believe to be Heidegger's view. But one could perhaps assume that for—it may be simply that Heidegger would say for practical purposes Socrates and Plato are undistinguishable . . . It could be such a simple thing, I don't

know. You know? Because otherwise we run up against this difficulty: What is Socratic and what is non-Socratic . . . and if Plato therefore would say: I don't speak for Socrates at all. If you have made the advance decision that Xenophon is negligible, and there is no sign that Heidegger ever revised his judgment on nineteenth-century classical scholarship about that.

**Comment:** It is not clear to me, the distinction between, say, the importance of looking for Socrates as Socrates was and the importance of understanding, say, Plato's Socrates as Plato understood him and Xenophon's Socrates as Xenophon understood him—or let me add a remark, that Xenophon shows by deed that he is capable of writing history clearly does not mean that he wrote a history in the same way that, say, that modern scientific historians write—

**LS:** No, nor did Thucydides.

**Same commenter:** Nor Thucydides. And therefore it would seem that the difficulty presented by, say, Plato not speaking in his own name is perhaps less visible, but it's certainly there, and the fact Xenophon wrote the speeches of Socrates—

**LS:** The first rule of reading is, can be stated as follows—I think I stated it earlier today: Be a good boy. Be not distrustful, be not nasty, and so on. So now when Xenophon tells you, “I once heard Socrates say this and this”—well, I give him the benefit of the doubt and say, “You heard him say that.” Perhaps I will later on be compelled to revise that judgment and say that he was simply *lying*. Lying may be no worse than any novelist who also says Madame Bovary did this and this, and Madame Bovary never existed. But still, we have to go through this thing. Xenophon raises the claim that he tells us stories which actually happened, and he raises claims in his own name. Plato never does. Either the scene opens and you see, say, Socrates and Gorgias, or Calicles or whoever it may be—or someone, not Plato, maybe Socrates, tells you . . . Never Plato. I admit that this is rather jocular, but it is not my fault that it is jocular, because the whole situation is jocular because of the unserious character of writing . . . Platonic or Socratic . . . And the most important point, after all, this is not whether this conversation took place, but: What is justice? *That* is the hard question.

**Same commenter:** That is what I was really asking.

**LS:** Sure. But for some reasons which I cannot now explain (it's about 1:17),<sup>21</sup> Plato and Socrates and some other people of this kind felt that you cannot raise the question of what is just properly except by telling stories. I have been told that the Chinese are in the habit of telling stories rather than proceeding scientifically by definition and so on, although the way of telling stories in Plato and Xenophon is very different, I suppose, from the Chinese but in this generality they seem to agree. And that is the reason why my first course on this campus is devoted to Aristotle's *Ethics*, because there is no funny business. [Laughter] He tells as you could see . . . and therefore you learn from him what justice is without any difficulty. Plato—you hear certain assertions may satisfy Glaucon, perhaps, and Adeimantus, but not necessarily ourselves, nor necessarily Socrates. And so we have to do some more work.

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<sup>21</sup> Strauss apparently refers to the time.

**Commenter:** . . . you point to. I would begin by first addressing myself to one remark you made about Nietzsche's interpretation of Socrates, it's either singularly inartistic or destroying . . .

**LS:** Socrates.

**Commenter:** Yes, the first theoretical man. And to contrast that with Hegel's understanding of Socrates, and just generally, for example, Hegel's understanding of the Greek spirit and plastic artists . . . and Socrates sculpting inwards . . . consciously constructing the harmonious character. Both insights seem to be somehow very insightful.<sup>22</sup>

**LS:** In other words, you believe that there is a harmony between Socrates and Greek art.

**Same commenter:** Well, that's what Hegel suggests.

**LS:** Ya, but we must not forget, and I say this with all respect, that Hegel was harmonistic [laughter] and if therefore there are some deep disharmonies Hegel is not the most *likely* place [laughter] . . . Now if we proceed in our simple good boy's manner, then we learn that Socrates was particularly connected with one poet, Euripides, who is today regarded as the least great Greek [tragedian] and was apparently regarded in this way I believe by some people . . . in his time. At any rate, in a Platonic dialogue where a young man mentions the wisest men in the various fields of human endeavor, he mentions among the dramatic poets *Sophocles*, not Euripides.<sup>23</sup> But at any rate, I would start from such things, you know. There are—Socrates treats poetry, culture, and painting in both Xenophon and Plato, and there you hear . . . after all, at first glance one is justified in saying that Socrates was not very music: what he does in the *Republic*, he throws them out, all of them except those, a kind of good simple martial and [religious].

**Same commenter:** Could I add one point to this . . . but Hegel didn't . . . that Socrates was in his own life extremely artful . . . concerned with just that point, that somehow the mystery . . .

**LS:** In a way, I suggested that also at the beginning when I spoke that Socrates of all the philosophers has this peculiar *notoriety* or fame, that he is lying . . . I don't mean to say that a man like Kant ever stole or committed other improprieties, but the stories told about Kant, that he was a few times considering marriage but he never did, and then the people in Königsberg, or Kaliningrad as it is called now, regulated their watches due to Kant's stroll . . . is not comparable to Socrates, obviously, because—his death, at the very least, as a thing gradually and surpassing in every respect, say, the death of Giordano Bruno and any other people of whom . . .

And now on the basis of the authority vested in me— [Laughter]

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<sup>22</sup> This commenter has a very soft voice that was not picked up well by the microphone.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Strauss meant to refer to *Memorabilia* 1.4.3, not to a Platonic dialogue.